

Acupuncture and the Australian workers'
compensation system: studies on the
Chinese medicine profession's
perceptions and interactions with the
workers' compensation system and their
treatment of work-related injuries

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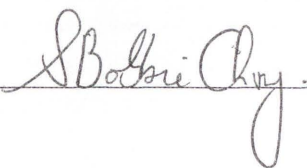
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Signature of Candidate

_____

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Table of contents

Certificate of Authorship/Originality.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Supporting publications.....	v
Table of contents.....	vii
List of Figures	xvii
List of Tables.....	xix
Abbreviations.....	xxii
Abstract	xxiii
CHAPTER 1: Introduction and thesis aims	26
1.1 Background to the studies: the integration of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Australia.....	26
1.2 The Australian workers' compensation system	28
1.3 Database literature review	29
1.4 Impact of the lack of research: Discussion between the New South Wales government and the CM profession	35
1.5 Problems resulting from poor data collection on the use of acupuncture within the Australian workers' compensation system.....	36
1.6 Implications for research	37
1.7 Study Aims	39
1.8 Format of thesis	40

CHAPTER 2: Chinese medicine practice in Australia and its relationship to the Australian workers' compensation system44

2.1.	Acupuncture and Chinese medicine in Australia: A historical and legislative perspective	44
2.1.1.	The professional development of Chinese medicine profession in Australia	44
2.1.2.	An overview of the legislative development of the CM profession in Australian	46
2.2.	Recognition of acupuncture within the broader Australian health system.....	48
2.2.1.	Use of acupuncture within Medicare Australia (Australia's universal health care system) and the private health insurance system	50
2.2.1.1.	Acupuncture and Medicare Australia.....	51
2.2.1.2	Acupuncture and the Australian Private health insurance system .	53
2.3	Acupuncture and the Australian workers' compensation system	56
2.3.1.	A brief introduction to workers' compensation and its development in Australia	57
2.3.2.	Workers' compensation arrangements in 21st century Australia: one country 11 Schemes.....	60
2.4	Similarities and differences between the workers' compensation Schemes.....	61
2.5	Medical provisions for Allied health professions within the Australian workers' compensation laws.....	62
2.6	The legitimacy of the Chinese medicine profession and its appropriateness as a treatment option for work-related injuries	64
2.6.1.	Acupuncture and Chinese medicine	64
2.6.2.	Scope of Chinese medicine practice.....	65
2.6.3.	Acupuncture and the World Health Organisation statement	66
2.6.4.	Acupuncture: support from the NHMRC, the NIH and NICE	67
2.7	Efficacy of acupuncture in the treatment of musculoskeletal conditions	68
2.8	Discussion: Australia's fragmented workers' compensation system and the impact on the Chinese medicine profession and the recognition of acupuncture.....	72
2.8.1	Categories of recognition of Chinese medicine practitioners within Australia's workers' compensation system.....	72

2.8.2	Further complications: two categories of acupuncture recognition: registered health professions versus non-registered health professions	74
2.8.3	Clinical impact of medical provisions and acupuncture: An overview of the Commonwealth, Victorian and New South Wales workers' compensation Schemes.....	78
2.8.3.1	The Commonwealth workers' compensation Scheme.....	78
2.8.3.2	The Victorian workers' compensation Scheme	79
2.8.3.3	The New South Wales workers' compensation Scheme	81
2.9	Conclusion	85

CHAPTER 3: Study 1: National workforce study, Study Design, Results and Discussion (Part I):.....87

3.1	Introduction	87
3.2	Study Aims, Design and Method	88
3.2.1	Study aims	88
3.2.2	Survey design	89
3.2.3	Survey distribution list	89
3.2.3.1	Refining the survey distribution list: problems with multiple distribution lists.....	91
3.2.3.2	Refining the survey distribution list: removing duplication.....	92
3.2.5	Participant exclusion criteria	94
3.2.6.1	Contents of each survey package distributed	95
3.2.7	Data Analysis	96
3.3.	Results.....	96
3.3.1	Response rate.....	97
3.3.2	Part I: Broad demographic characteristics of all survey respondents.....	98
3.3.2.1.	State of residence	99
3.3.2.2.	Age and Gender	100
3.3.2.3.	Number of years in clinical practice	102
3.3.2.4.	Practice type	102
3.3.2.5.	Area of specialty	103

3.4. Results of an in-depth analysis of survey respondents from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland	104
3.4.1. Age, gender and practice type	105
3.4.2. Number of years in clinical practice.....	105
3.4.3. Highest level of formal education in Chinese medicine and acupuncture...	105
3.4.4. Place of training	108
3.4.5. Area of specialty.....	109
3.4.6. Current professional association membership(s).....	109
3.4.7. Summary of chi-square test results performed on the demographic questions	109
3.5. Discussion.....	110
3.5.1 Strengths and limitations of Study 1	110
3.5.2 Demographic characteristics of Chinese medicine practitioners surveyed .	113
▪ Age, gender and number of years in clinical practice	113
▪ Education and place of training	114
▪ Practice type	116
3.6. Summary of the demographic characteristics of Chinese medicine practitioners surveyed	117

CHAPTER 4: Results Part II (Study 1): Chinese medicine practitioner's interactions with the Australian workers' Compensation system.....119

4.1 Study 1, Part II: Introduction	119
4.2 Knowledge and perceptions of the workers' compensation Scheme ..	121
4.2.1. Knowledge of the workers' compensation Scheme	121
4.2.2. Formal training and education obtained on workers' compensation and awareness of legal obligations.....	123
4.2.3. Perceived difficulties of the workers' compensation Scheme	123
4.2.4. Obtaining assistance when experiencing difficulties with the workers' compensation Scheme	124
4.2.5. Practitioners' marketing efforts to attract workers' compensation patients and preferences for future directions for the Chinese medicine profession within the Australian workers' compensation system	126

4.3	Respondents who have treated workers' compensation patients.....	127
4.3.1.	Frequency of workers' compensation patients treated (inclusive of all respondents).....	128
4.3.1.1.	Estimated number of workers' compensation patients treated in 2003 and 2004 (inclusive of all respondents).....	128
4.3.1.2.	Respondents from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland who have treated workers' compensation patients	129
4.3.1.3.	New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland respondents estimated number of workers' compensation patients treated in 2004 and 2003	131
4.3.2.	Patient referral patterns	132
4.3.3.	Techniques utilised by practitioners when treating injured workers.....	133
4.3.4.	Difficulties experienced when engaging with the workers' compensation system.....	134
4.3.4.1.	Question 17 part b-Identified difficulties from respondents who have treated workers' compensation patients and experienced difficulties	135
4.3.5.	Workplace systems in place to manage workers' compensation patients (including how the system w.....	136
4.3.6.	Interactions with insurance companies (frequency of treatment request approvals and number of insurance companies respondents have engaged with)	137
4.3.6.1.	Frequency of approval for treatment requests submitted.....	137
4.3.6.2.	Details of insurance companies respondents have engaged with.	138
4.3.7.	Payment rates charged.....	139
4.3.7.1.	Reasons respondents billed more than their standard fees when treating workers' compensation patients.....	140
4.3.7.2.	Other reasons for billing more than respondent's standard fee....	141
4.3.8.	Report writing practices	142
4.3.8.1.	Writing reports to insurance companies.....	142
4.3.8.2.	Who requested the report?	142
4.3.8.3.	Frequency of report writing	144
4.3.8.4.	Writing reports to other sources	145
4.4	Subgroup 1 – Respondents who had treated workers' compensation patients and had a system in place (to manage workers' compensation patients)	146

4.4.1.	Development of the workplace system to manage workers' compensation patients	147
4.4.2.	Perceived effectiveness of system in place to manage workers' compensation patients	148
4.5	Respondents who have not treated workers' compensation patients .	148
4.5.1	Reasons respondents have not treated a workers' compensation patient.....	149
4.5.2	Other reasons for not having treated a workers' compensation patient	149
4.6	Respondents who have not treated workers' compensation patients but have a system in place (to manage workers' compensation patients).	151
4.7	Summary and discussion of the workers' compensation results	151
4.7.1	Respondents' knowledge and perceptions of the workers' compensation Scheme	151
4.7.2	Perceived difficulties with the workers' compensation system.....	153
4.7.3	Obtaining assistance when experiencing difficulties with workers' compensation system.....	154
4.7.4	Practitioners' marketing efforts to attract workers' compensation patients and preferences for future directions for the CM profession within the Australian workers' compensation system.....	155
4.7.5	Respondents who have treated workers' compensation patients.....	157
4.7.6	Referral patterns	158
4.7.7	Difficulties experienced with the workers' compensation system	159
4.7.8	Workplace systems in place to manage workers' compensation patients (including how the system was developed and perceived level of effectiveness).....	160
4.7.9	Interactions with insurance companies (frequency of treatment request approvals and number of insurance companies respondents have engaged with)	161
4.7.10	Payment rates charged.....	162
4.7.11	Report writing practices	164
4.7.12	Respondents who have treated workers' compensation patients and have a system in place	165
4.7.13	Respondents who have not treated workers' compensation patients	166
4.8	Study 1 Conclusion	166
CHAPTER 5:	Case Study: New South Wales	171

5.1	Introduction	171
5.2	Rationale for selecting New South Wales	172
5.3	Additional issues impacting the availability of suitable data for collection and analysis	175
5.4	The NSW Scheme	176
5.4.1.	Design of the NSW Scheme	177
5.4.1.1.	New South Wales workers' compensation legislation and funding	178
5.4.2.	Changes to the provisions for medical and treatment costs in the New South Wales Scheme	179
5.4.3.	Rehabilitation within the New South Wales Scheme	181
5.4.3.1.	Rehabilitation, treatment and the Workers' compensation Act 1987	182
5.4.4.	Workers' compensation claim: stake-holders and the process – where Chinese medicine practitioners fit into this process	186
5.4.5.	Injury Management and the role of Allied health providers: relevance for the Chinese medicine profession.....	188
5.4.6.	Common injuries and the cost impact to the NSW Scheme: relevance for Chinese medicine practitioners	190

CHAPTER 6: Study 2: The use of acupuncture by injured workers in the New South Wales workers' compensation Scheme - Study design, Aims and Objectives and Results Part I.....193

6.1.	Introduction	193
6.2.	Conceptualisation of Study 2	194
6.3.	Method	197
6.3.1.	Study aims and objectives	197
6.3.2.	Study 2 design	197
6.3.2.1.	Inclusion and exclusion criteria	198
▪	6.3.2.1.1. Claims	198
▪	6.3.2.1.2. Categories of information.....	198
6.3.3.	Data Analysis	199
6.4.	Results.....	200

6.5. Part I: Results of the demographic characteristics of injured workers	200
6.5.1. Gender and Age.....	201
6.5.2. Nature of the workers' compensation claim.....	202
6.5.3. Language spoken.....	202
6.5.4. Geographical location.....	203
6.5.5. Workers' compensation claims distribution within the NSW Statistical Division	204
6.5.6. Breakdown of claims within the Sydney Statistical Division	206
6.6. Discussion on the results of the demographic characteristics of injured workers	212

CHAPTER 7: Study 2 Results Part II and III: Acupuncture treatments (Part II) and the classification of injuries (Part III)...219

7.1. Results Part II: Discerning the nature of acupuncture treatments injured workers received	219
7.1.1 Acupuncture treatment providers: Medical versus Non-medical practitioners	220
7.1.2 Yearly breakdown of acupuncture costs claimed per calendar year between August 1987 and June 2006	223
7.1.3 Number of acupuncture treatments identified within each claim.....	226
7.1.4 Comparison of the cost associated with acupuncture, physiotherapy, chiropractic and osteopathy treatments	228
7.2. Discussion of Results Part II.....	230
7.2.1. Acupuncture treatment providers and the frequency of acupuncture utilisation by injured workers.....	230
7.2.2. Frequency of acupuncture treatments.....	236
7.2.3. Comparison of the cost associated with acupuncture, physiotherapy, chiropractic and osteopathy treatments	237
7.3. Results Part III: The Classification of presenting injuries (seen in workers who received acupuncture treatment)	241
7.3.1. Introduction: Classifying the nature and type of injuries being treated with acupuncture	241
7.3.1.1. Nature of the Injury/Disease	242
7.3.1.2. Acute and chronic nature of injuries presented by workers	243

7.3.1.3.	Location of injuries/diseases	244
7.3.1.4.	Mechanism of injury/disease.....	245
7.3.1.5.	Agency of injury/disease.....	246
7.4.	Discussion of Results Part III	247
7.5.	Study 2: Overall summary and conclusion	250
CHAPTER 8:	255
Summary and recommendations		255
8.1.	The Chinese medicine profession and its interaction with the workers' compensation Schemes: Study 1 outcomes and implications	256
8.2.	Study 2 outcomes and implications	259
8.3.	Recommendation for future researchers.....	261
8.4.	The national registration of health professions: implications for the workers' compensation Schemes and stakeholders	262
8.5.	Conclusion	264
References		266
Appendices		289
Appendix 2.1:	Variations and common aspects within Australia's workers' compensation Schemes.....	289
Appendix 2.2:	The World Health Organisation Provisional List of diseases successfully treated by acupuncture (1979) ⁷⁸	292
Appendix 2.3:	The World Health Organisation list of diseases or disorders for which acupuncture therapy has been tested in controlled clinical trials reported in the literature (up to 1999) ⁷⁹	295
Appendix 3.1:	Study 1 survey tool.....	299
Appendix 5.1:	Changes to Medical and hospital treatment provisions within the NSW workers' compensation legislation: 1900 to 2010	306
Appendix 5.2:	Provisions for medical, hospital and rehabilitation expenses in the NSW <i>Workers' compensation Act</i> 1987	311
Appendix 6.1:	Reports required from Allianz for the Study 2	315

Appendix 6.2: Additional reports required from Allianz 318

Appendix 6.3: Claims details gathered from injured workers used in Study 2..... 320

Appendix 6.4: Australia Standard Geographical Classification Main Classification
Structure 322

Appendix 7.1: Medicare Benefit Schedule: Acupuncture Items 325

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 National figures showing the frequency of Medicare Items numbers 173, 193, 197 and 199 processed by Medicare Australia from January 1994 to June 2010 ..	52
Figure 2.2 National figures showing the annual cost of Medicare Items 173, 193, 195, 197 and 199 - Benefits processed by Medicare Australia from January 1994 to June 2010.....	52
Figure 2.3 NSW Private Health Insurance figures for Acupuncture/acupressure, Chiropractic, and Physiotherapy services Quarter ending June 2000 to 2010.....	55
Figure 2.4 Formal recognition of acupuncture when performed by a Chinese medicine practitioner within Australia's state based workers' compensation Schemes	76
Figure 3.1 Diagrammatic representation of age and gender comparison of all survey respondents	101
Figure 3.2. Year of graduation of respondents from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.....	107
Figure 4.1 Initial year when Chinese medicine practitioners in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland commenced treating workers' compensation patients.....	130
Figure 5.1 Stakeholders involved with a workers' compensation claim	187
Figure 6.1 Flowchart of the conceptualisation for Study 2	196
Figure 6.2 Diagrammatic distribution of claims within the New South Wales Statistical Divisions	206
Figure 6.3 Distribution of claims within the Statistical Subdivisions of Sydney.....	207
Figure 6.4 Mean cost of total acupuncture treatments per claim within the Sydney Statistical Subdivisions	209
Figure 6.5 Comparison of the claims distribution and mean total acupuncture cost per claim within the Sydney Statistical Subdivisions.....	208
Figure 6.6 Comparative analysis of the Mean cost of Acupuncture per claim within the Sydney Statistical Subdivisions and the broader NSW Statistical Divisions.....	209
Figure 7.1. Distribution of claims by calendar year	225
Figure 7.2 Mean total cost of acupuncture treatments of finalised claims between 1987 and 2006.....	225
Figure 7.3 Total cost of acupuncture, physiotherapy, chiropractic and osteopathy treatments between August 18 1987 and June 13 2006	230

Figure 7.4 Frequency of Medicare Items numbers 173, 193, 197 and 199 processed by
Medicare Australia from January 1994 to June 2010 234

Figure 7.5 Annual cost of Medicare Items 173, 193, 195, 197 and 199 - Benefits processed
by Medicare Australia from January 1994 to June 2010 234

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Summary of the 11 scholarly papers in the review	34
Table 2.1 NSW Private Health Insurance: Frequency of Acupuncture/acupressure, Chiropractic and Physiotherapy services, Quarter ending June 2000 to 2010	54
Table 2.2 The introduction of State based workers' compensation legislation in Australia	60
Table 2.3 Levels of recognition of acupuncture and the Chinese medicine profession by Australia's workers' compensation Schemes	77
Table 2.4 Provisions for acupuncture within the Commonwealth, Victorian and New South Wales workers' compensation Schemes (as at July 2010).....	84
Table 3.1 Distribution of all survey respondents by State of residence	100
Table 3.2 Age and gender of all survey respondents	101
Table 3.3 Number of years in clinical practice reported by all survey respondents	102
Table 3.4 Reported practice types of all survey respondents	103
Table 3.5 Areas of specialty indicated by all respondents	104
Table 3.6 Re-coding of Question 6-Highest level of formal education in Chinese medicine/acupuncture obtained.....	106
Table 3.7 Highest level of formal education in Chinese Medicine and acupuncture from respondents in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland	107
Table 3.8 Teaching institutions where survey respondents from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland trained and obtained their qualification(s) in Chinese medicine and acupuncture.....	108
Table 3.9 Results of chi-square analysis of demographic questions	110
Table 4.1 Re-coding of Question 10 – How would you rate your knowledge of the workers' compensation system in your state?.....	122
Table 4.2 New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland respondents' knowledge of the workers' compensation Scheme.....	122
Table 4.3 New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland respondents' overall preferences for seeking assistance when experiencing difficulties with workers' compensation patients	125
Table 4.4 State based preferences when seeking assistance with workers' compensation difficulties experienced	125
Table 4.5 Surveyed respondents overall level of engagement with injured workers.....	129

Table 4.6 Re-coding of Question 14 part b-Number of individual patients treated in 2004	131
Table 4.7 Estimated number of workers' compensation patients treated by respondents from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland in 2004	131
Table 4.8 Techniques utilised by Chinese Medicine practitioners surveyed when treating workers' compensation patients.....	134
Table 4.9 Recoding of Question 23-How often requests for acupuncture were approved from the insurance companies.....	138
Table 4.10 Approval rates for acupuncture treatment requests by respondents from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.....	138
Table 4.11 Workers' compensation insurance companies' respondents in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland reported as having engaged with	139
Table 4.12 Respondents reasons for billing more than standard fee rates when treating workers' compensation patients.....	141
Table 4.13 Person(s) requesting report(s) from respondents to insurance companies in relation to workers' compensation patient.....	144
Table 4.14 Who respondents wrote reports to	146
Table 4.15 Recoding of Question 21-How effective would you rate your current system?	148
Table 4.16 Reasons practitioners in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have not treated workers' compensation patients	150
Table 5.2 Role of allied health providers in the NSW Scheme.....	189
Table 6.1 Frequency of claims against the injured workers' age (in 10 year intervals)...	201
Table 6.2 Distribution of workers' compensation claims within the New South Wales Statistical Divisions.....	205
Table 7.1 Breakdown of the claims by treating acupuncture practitioner: Medical acupuncture practitioners and Non-medical acupuncture practitioner.....	222
Table 7.2 Comparison of the fee schedules and payment rates for acupuncture treatments provided by non-medical acupuncture practitioners and registered acupuncture practitioners.....	222
Table 7.3 Comparison of finalised claims and all claims by calendar year	224
Table 7.4 Breakdown of all workers' compensation claims by the number of total acupuncture treatments within each claim	227
Table 7.5 Breakdown of claims in group with 0-49 recorded acupuncture treatments....	227

Table 7.6 Comparison of acupuncture, physiotherapy, chiropractic and osteopathy
therapies and associated costs 229

Table 7.7 Comparative cost of acupuncture, physiotherapy, chiropractic and osteopathy
therapies per claim between August 18, 1987 and June 13, 2006 229

Table 7.8 Nature of injury and diseases treated with acupuncture-categories derived from
the ToOCS 3.0 243

Table 7.9 Location of injuries 244

Table 7.10 Mechanisms of Injury/Disease 245

Table 7.11 Agency of Injury/Disease..... 247

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AACMA	Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association
Allianz	Allianz Australia (NSW) workers' compensation Ltd
ASCO	Australian Standard Classification of Occupations
ASGC	Australia Standard Geographical Classification
CAM	Complementary and Alternative medicine
CHM	Chinese herbal medicine
CM	Chinese medicine
Comcare	Australian Commonwealth workers' compensation Scheme
GP	General practitioner (also meaning registered medical practitioner)
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NOHSC	National Occupational Health and Safety Commission
NTD	Nominated Treating Doctor
Scheme	Workers' compensation Scheme
TCM	Traditional Chinese medicine (also meaning CM)
ToOCS	Types of Occurrence Classification System
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney
WHO	World Health Organisation
WorkCover	Workers' compensation authority of New South Wales
Work Safe	Workers' compensation authority of Victoria

Abstract

The use of acupuncture by Chinese medicine (CM) practitioners has become an increasingly popular treatment modality of choice in Australia in the last four decades. Acupuncture is increasingly being used as part of an individual's health care strategy, with CM practitioners often integrated within a primary care context; they are being consulted on issues of both acute and chronic illness, as providers of treatment for musculoskeletal injury and as sources of lifestyle and dietary advice. As an extension of an individual's choice of treatment for their health has been their choice of treatment in work contexts where the individual as a 'worker', may have suffered an injury or illness during the course of their employment. Termed 'work-related injuries', this falls within the jurisdiction of the 'workers' compensation system' where the individual still retains the right to their choice of treatment(s).

Anecdotal reports from an Australian CM professional association and the New South Wales (NSW) workers' compensation industry indicates that acupuncture is being utilised in the Australian workers' compensation system; that injured workers are seeking acupuncture treatments from CM practitioners; while insurance companies are providing payments to CM practitioners on the workers behalf for acupuncture treatment. Where factual evidence for the use and integration of acupuncture was thought to exist, a preliminary search into the Australian workers' compensation system revealed a noticeable paucity of information on the use of acupuncture by CM practitioners. An extensive literature review was undertaken which identified no collated data or documented information in the available literature on the use of acupuncture by CM practitioners within the workers' compensation system beyond the anecdotal reports. In particular, no studies were located investigating the use of acupuncture as a treatment modality within the Australian workers' compensation system. Consequently, the use of acupuncture by CM practitioners to assist injured workers in the recovery of a work-related injury or illness is unknown.

Therefore, the primary aim of this thesis was to provide information and an understanding of the utilisation of acupuncture by CM practitioners within the workers' compensation system through a series of investigative studies. The present research is composed of two

distinct but inter-related studies (termed Study 1 and Study 2). The aim of Study 1 was to obtain an overview of the CM profession's engagement with Australia's workers' compensation system and a consequent investigation into their perceptions of this system. Data were gathered on the following three areas:

- The proportion of CM practitioners engaging with the workers' compensation system as treatment providers of acupuncture to injured workers
- CM practitioners perceptions and views of this system, and
- To gather demographic profile of the CM practitioners in order to assist in contextualising the responses received with respect to a respondent's state and/or territory of residence.

Study 2 was an investigation into the demographic profile of injured workers who received acupuncture from CM practitioners as part of their workers' compensation claim. This was achieved through a retrospective analysis of workers' compensation claims data held by one Scheme Agent in NSW. The primary aims of Study 2 were:

- To gather a profile of the injured workers who utilised acupuncture treatment
- Profile the work-related injuries treated with acupuncture (identified as occurring during the acute or chronic phase of the injury, the anatomical location of the injury treated, the mechanism and agency of the injury), and
- An analysis of the acupuncture treatment cost

Together, the two studies begin to address the lack of information that currently exists in the Australian workers' compensation system on the use of acupuncture by Chinese medicine practitioners in the treatment of work-related injuries.

The findings from Study 1 confirmed anecdotal reports that CM practitioners have been treating injured workers in Australia's workers' compensation system, with the first reported workers' compensation 'patient' treated in 1970 by a CM practitioner. Study 1 also found significant associations between a CM practitioner's State of residence, perceptions of the State based workers' compensation Scheme and the difficulties faced when engaging with these Schemes. These relationships were attributed to the varying levels of recognition given to acupuncture (as a treatment modality) and CM practitioners (as therapy providers).

The demographic information reported in Study 2 found injured workers from across the State of NSW had utilised acupuncture to assist in the recovery of a work-related injury. There was a preference by injured workers to obtain acupuncture treatments from non-medical acupuncture practitioners versus registered medical practitioners. The findings showed over half of the injured workers also sought acupuncture treatments during the acute stage of an injury (that is, within three months of sustaining the injury) and presented with injuries predominantly located in the trunk and upper limb areas. Injured workers aged between the years of 30-49 used acupuncture more than any other age group, while men who sustained a work-place injury were found to utilise acupuncture more than women. The cost associated with acupuncture treatments per claim were also shown to be reasonable when compared to physiotherapy and chiropractic costs within the study database. Together, the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 showed an overall increase in the number of CM practitioners treating injured workers, particularly during the years 1994 to 2004. The studies provided concrete evidence that acupuncture has been used as a treatment by injured workers within the Australian workers' compensation.

In conclusion, the research presented in this thesis provides the first evidence for the systematic use of acupuncture by Chinese medicine practitioners within the Australian workers' compensation system. The continued use of acupuncture within Australia will most likely see a greater number of injured workers seeking acupuncture treatment to assist in the recovery of their work-related injury or illness. This will have implications for Australia's workers' compensation system when CM practitioners become registered in 2012 as part of the National Registration and Accreditation scheme for health professions. In effect, the findings of the studies are valuable to the professional associations (to identify topics of continuing professional education) and to educators (for developing further necessary subjects on 'professional issues' in relation to workers' compensation). The workers' compensation Schemes themselves can draw upon the findings and better develop systems, policy and procedures governing the utilisation of acupuncture by CM practitioners where at present none exist or where it exists in limited form, with the exception of Victoria. Besides noting a need for information, the development of 'education' can be more specifically directed towards topics that have a practice oriented outcome to assist CM practitioners to better engage with the workers' compensation system. This will benefit the workers' compensation Schemes themselves, ensure suitably qualified practitioners are providing the acupuncture treatments and ultimately, ensure the appropriate and timely treatment of injured workers.